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ABSTRACT

Composition instruction in Japan's two-year colleges must build on the English learned in earlier education and undo the problems created by the grammar-translation method. In addition, it must often develop creativity and critical-thinking skills not commonly taught in the Japanese educational system. One teacher's approach is to stress organization, beginning with simple list-making and progressing to instruction in classification skills, vocabulary, idiomatic usage, description of feelings, and subsequently writing themes on specific topics. One assignment includes having students write letters to the editor of a newspaper. While homework is not assigned, diary writing is encouraged. In grading, equal weight is given to quality and quantity of writing. The primary objective of this kind of teaching is to help Japanese students find their voice and sense of self in an educational system that conditions students to be quiet, accepting, and individually ineffectual. (MSE)

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TEACHING ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN A JUNIOR COLLEGE

by

Alex Shishin

The major difference between a junior college and a university English program in Japan is that in a junior college you have only two years in which to undo the damage done by the so-called grammar-translation method used in teaching English in secondary schools. Since transfering is rare, the freshman and sophomore years are all the higher education most junior college students will get.

Traditionally "English composition" in Japanese education has been equated with memorization of grammatical rules and supposedly exemplary sentences and translation of difficult passages from English literature. This, however, is not composition. Composition is creation, not regurgitation of pre-digested phrases.

Creativity and critical thinking are essential for college-level and scholarly writing (called ronbun in Japanese.) Perhaps the English-as-autopsy approach of "grammar-translation" wouldn't be so damaging were critical skills extensively taught in Japanese (Kokugo) composition but generally they aren't. Therefore, English teachers might have to teach in L-2 what their students should have learned in L-1.

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I stress organization above everything else in my composition classes. "Organization" is shorthand for knowing what you're doing when you write, whether your style is "linear," discursive or whatever. "Organization" involves intellectual discipline as much or more than simply knowing the mechanics of "good" style. Given the underdeveloped intellects and English of my freshman students (so much for Japan's supposedly excellence-creating educational system) I begin teaching organization at the most primitive level: writing lists. (All writing is ultimately list-making, whether you're writing a grocery memo or Genji Monogatari.) I show my students pictures and have them list all that they see. This I write on the black board.

I used to project slides for this purpose which was a bother because I was always trying to balance between enough darkness for the slides and enough light for my students' eyes. Fortunately at my present college I can use the built-in video in our language lab to show prints.

After a time, I expand this exercise, by asking the students to classify the items they see in my pictures and which I have listed on the board according to importance: I-Most Important; 1-Very Important; 2-Secondary, 3-Least Important. As I point to items on the black board the students call out numbers. I'll list all the numbers called out for each item (2-3, for example) to stress that this classification is greatly subjective. After this, I teach the class the journalistic "inverted pyramid" taught to cub reporters the world over. It's a quick way to learn to organize your material when you have little time and most likely your finished product is your first draft. It is especially

good for timed writing assignments.

One nice spin-off from this is vocabulary and idiomatic usage learning. By looking at images and trying to describe them the students (and I) begin to better understand what they do and don't know in English. Free writing and free conversation would also bring this out but it would, I think, take longer.

Should you give students "useful expressions" pertaining to the assignment before they write or let them struggle to find the right expression? The first might make them into human parrots (In doing textual analysis, Japanese students have a genius for lifting phrases from the text that they half understand and incorporating them into their own writing) while the second might tend to create errors which will fossilize if not corrected. I usually make my students struggle.

Presently, I ask them to describe the pictures and give their feelings about them. I use pictures that would usually generate strong feelings. I tell them that this approach is close to the style of kansobun--the book reports they wrote as secondary students. These exercises lead into my lecturing on perception. How do we know what we know? What is logic and logical fallacies? How does one use deduction and induction?

I do a lot of explaining. When I first meet with my freshman composition students, I explain that the ultimate goal of the class is train the students to write ronbun in English. I try to explain why I am giving the work that I am giving them and confess my own fallibilities. I try to keep my explanations simple ("Style is

like a face; rhetoric is like makeup") but I know I'm at best half understood. Fortunately Japanese students have a mania for copying everything the teacher writes on the board. Therefore, I try to write out my explaination as I say them, hoping that they'll refer back to their notes. Even if they half-understand, I believe they feel less bewildered and frightened by having procedures explained.

Eventually I have them write themes on selected topics, revise and revise and type the final drafts. My mid-term and final exams are essay and "open book." Though I generally don't make extensive corrections on papers and only lecture about grammar, etc. if I find that I'm irritated by constant collective errors, I do write detailed corrections and comments on the final papers.

My syllabus is minimal: slides and prints, short articles cut from newspapers, passages from essays. Please note: I never xerox out of textbooks.

Also, I almost never assign homework. The exceptions are typed final drafts and diaries. With Regarding diaries, I say that I only require one sentence per day but that the more they write the happier I am.

I hope that the free-flowing unstructured and unpredictable nature of diaries will provide some kind of balance to the very structured assignments I give my students in class. Both are meant to encourage prolixity.

Writing is a lonely craft which one eventually acquires through relentless practise. While I believe the cliche that "you cannot teach someone to write" is untrue, I see my relation to the

the student like a tug boat's relation to a ship. The tug can only guide it with gentle nudges; the ship's real power comes from within.

How do I grade? I tell my students that I give equal weight to quality and quantity. In reality, this division is moot because practically all of my best writers are prolific while the mediocre ones try to get by with as little writing as possible.

I must add that I often have my students write letters to the editor for their themes. I want to concentrate on the sort of writing they would probably do in later life (perhaps exclusively in Japanese.) Both diaries and letters to the editor are literary forms which give voice to the common citizen.

This brings me to my passion for teaching writing. I believe that democracy requires not only an informed but articulate public. Not just noisy but intelligently and, above all, decisively vocal. Japan's totalitarian educational system conditions students to quiet, accepting and individually ineffectual. I want to teach them to be the opposite.

My students, all women, are, for the most part, the future airline hostesses, bank clerks and housewives of Japan--the very people who must bear the brunt of class exploitation and sexist discrimination. To help them find the voice and sense of self to fight back is my primary consideration as a teacher.